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Socialism for Trade Unionists



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SOCIALISM FOR TRADE UNIONISTS

By
C. R. ATTLEE, M.P.



LIFE WITHOUT INDUSTRY
IS GUILT.

I.L.P. PROGRAMME PAMPHLET

No. 4

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INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY

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R. W. E. M. K.
(I.L.P.)

INTRODUCTION

The Great War has made Labour one of the deciding factors in world politics. In almost every country Labour is rapidly approaching power. Men and women are therefore naturally asking one another, "What will Labour do when it is entrusted with the Government of the country; how will it handle the problems of peace and war, trade, finance, and education?"

In a series of pamphlets, of which this is one, the Independent Labour Party attempts to give a clear and concise answer to these queries.

The I.L.P. stands for Socialism. It believes that Socialism is not merely one amongst many remedies, but the only practical remedy for the gigantic problems created by the world war. It believes that it is the bold programme and no other that can solve present-day evils.

Socialism itself—like all our thinking—has changed and developed in the light of the experience of the last few years. The I.L.P. has, therefore, revised its programme, and now offers this series of pamphlets as an interpretation of modern Socialism.

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SOCIALISM FOR TRADE UNIONISTS

DURING the last two years the industrial Labour Movement in Great Britain has sustained a series of heavy defeats. These defeats are all the more impressive from the fact that in 1919 the movement had reached its highest point in numbers and prestige. Over six million workers were in Unions.

Big advances in wages, leisure and hours had been won and the status of the worker in industry seemed on the point of being acknowledged. The Sankey Enquiry into the Mining Industry and the Shaw Enquiry into Transport had brought the Unions and their leaders prominently before the public and had exposed the inefficiency of the present methods of carrying on industry. The action of the Unions in threatening a general strike on the question of war with the Russian Republic had shown the possibilities of industrial action for political ends, while the Triple Alliance was the bogey of the middle-class readers of the capitalist Press.

To-day in every industry wages and conditions are slipping back to the pre-war standard. Not merely the newly-organised agricultural labourers and the sweated women workers have suffered, but the strongest units of the industrial army. The Miners, the Engineers and the Railwaymen have sustained heavy losses. The Trades Union Congress reports a loss of over a million members.

The position is one that should cause every worker in the country to consider seriously. He should ask himself what are the causes of this great set-back. Is it the fault of the leaders? Is it the faulty organisation? Is it the result of economic causes beyond control? Is

it, perhaps, the inevitable result of a failure to realise the necessary conditions of success, a failure to make correct use of the weapons available, a failure to realise the true objective of the movement?

Let us see if we can find an answer to these questions.

THE LESSON OF HISTORY.

It is now nearly a hundred years since Trade Unions ceased to be illegal conspiracies and were able to fight openly. During that period the movement has grown from a few scattered thousands to an organised body of over five millions. Unions count their members by the thousand instead of by tens. By various devices—the strike, collective bargaining, mutual insurance and political action—an endeavour has been made to build up a code which shall give the worker some rights against his master and to secure for him a larger share in the product of industry. Undoubtedly considerable advances have been made. Assuredly without the Unions, the plight of the worker to-day would be worse than it is.

But the fact remains that in 1922, as in 1822, the worker is still a mere wage-earner, dependent for his livelihood on the willingness of a capitalist to employ him at a profit. He has no status in industry, no security of life, no minimum standard of wage. When he ceases to be profitable he is thrown into the street to exist as he can on charity or State relief. Surely this is a poor return for a hundred years of endeavour and sacrifice.

Throughout Trade Union history there have been waves of advance and retreat. These waves have been conditioned by the state of trade. When trade was good, advances were won; when trade was bad, these advances were largely lost. Again and again history repeats itself. Brisk trade, a rush to enter the Unions, concessions in hours, wages and conditions obtained, and then—the slump, wages reduced, hours lengthened and a falling away of the newly-organised workers.

The last of these cycles of advance and retreat is with us to-day. The war created an abnormal situation. For the first time for hundreds of years there was a shortage of labour. Unemployment disappeared and the workers were in a position to demand a high price for their commodity, labour. But the nation was at war. An appeal was made to patriotism, and as the vast majority of trade unionists, leaders and rank and file alike, were ardent supporters of the war, the workers, unlike the capitalists, held their hand. Only in the later stages of the war, when industrial unrest became widespread, and the Shop Stewards' Movement forced the pace, and in the short boom that followed the Armistice, were concessions obtained.

In the first year after the war a feeling of elation prevailed, big talk was indulged in, and an appearance of Labour strength created. But the capitalists were only biding their time. Entrenched in the Profiteers' Parliament and vastly better organised than ever before, they watched the tide of unemployment flooding, and when millions were out of work and Union funds depleted, they struck, and struck hard. The workers were out-manoeuvred and out-fought. Black Friday was but the most outstanding incident in a series of crushing defeats all along the line.

INDUSTRIAL TRENCH WARFARE.

The contest between Capital and Labour on the industrial field is very like the long-drawn-out campaign in France and Flanders during the war. Each side is entrenched. Labour attacks and, after enormous sacrifices, gains a few hundred yards of trench, an extra twopence on piece rates, a shorter working day, the "dockers' tanner" or Union recognition. Then in due course comes the counter-attack, and, except for a few small gains, the whole advantage is swept away. In this warfare Capital holds the initiative. It knows when to attack and when to retreat according to plan. It occupies the high ground and has the more powerful

weapons, including the poison gas of the capitalist Press. This is the kind of warfare in which Labour has been engaged for the last hundred years. A fight for *small and limited objectives* gained with enormous sacrifice and lost again very soon. It is time that this form of warfare was ended.

LABOUR'S MISTAKEN OBJECTIVE.

The fault has been the failure to realise that little successes are of no permanent value. The objective must be the defeat of the enemy, the capture of his position and its consolidation. The capitalist position is the ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. It is true that Labour's organisation has been faulty and its leadership often bad, but this is caused by the mistaken aim. At the present moment, at a time of crisis, we have the N.U.R. and the A.E.U. fighting each other instead of the common enemy. Many workers still trust in their position as skilled craftsmen and assert their superiority over other workers. Many are more concerned in the fortunes of their particular Unions than in the interests of the workers. The tragedy of Labour has been the sacrifices made for wholly insufficient advantages.

The same weakness has been displayed in the use of the other great weapon, the vote. For years workers were content to send their masters to Parliament, contenting themselves with extracting from them promises to support particular measures, such as Mines Regulation and Workmen's Compensation Acts. Later they did begin to send their own men, but in such small numbers that they had to beg for concessions from the capitalist parties. Those representatives then, and even now, for the most part, regarded themselves as sent to look after the interests of particular bodies of workers and were content with small gains for their sections. The Labour Party to-day is but 143 in a House of 610, and even were a majority returned at the next election, they would have no clear idea of what

the workers expect them to do. The individual worker, if asked to sketch a Labour programme, would probably mention unemployment and housing, then perhaps some matter of concern to his particular industry. Some would mention nationalisation, but without any clear idea of how a nationalised industry would be carried on or what would be his position in it.

LABOUR'S REAL OBJECTIVE.

Industrial and political action are both necessary. Hitherto the workers have used, partially and uncertainly, one or other weapon. Some have endeavoured to gain industrial objects by political action, others political objects by industrial action. The two weapons must be used together. The political weapon is necessary for the capture of the power of the State, of the legislative and administrative machine and the forces of law and order. It must be used to effect a transfer of the ownership of industry from the capitalist to the community. The industrial weapon must be used to support the political power against all attempts at revolution by the capitalist class during the transition from capitalism to the co-operative commonwealth. And, above all, the workers must be so organised as to be ready to take over the control and management of industry from the capitalist.

THE CONTROL OF INDUSTRY.

Industry to-day is controlled by a small group of wealthy men, who carry it on for the purpose of making profit for themselves and for a larger body of shareholders whose sole function is to receive interests and profits. The characteristic unit in industry is the limited company controlled by the capitalist. In every industry the competition of a number of individual undertakings is being replaced by some form of trust or combine, while behind all combinations stands the great money trust of the big banks controlling credit. Labour's aim is to place the worker in control instead of the capitalist, to organise production for use

instead of for profit, and to replace capitalist autocracy by industrial democracy. Instead of the worker being "a hand" depending for his livelihood on the willingness of someone to employ him at a profit, without status and subject to the absolute commands of a master, he must be a free man controlling industry in association with his fellows in the interests of all.

The task of eliminating capitalist control belongs to political democracy ; the work of organising the new industrial order belongs to industrial democracy. The Trade Union movement is the expression of industrial democracy. It must undertake and fit itself for its task.

Let us consider the kind of organisation that we desire in industry and we shall see what reforms are needed in Trade Union structure and method.

THE NEW INDUSTRIAL ORDER.

Each industry is to be considered as a piece of social machinery designed for the performance of a particular service to the community. This service must be performed in the most efficient manner possible in the interests of all. Let us take the transport industry as an example. All transport, whether by rail, road, water, or air, will form one service, the general direction of which will be in the hands of representatives of the workers in the industry in consultation with representatives of the users of the service.

Within this great body of organised transport workers will be groups engaged in the different kinds of transport, railway, shipping, ports, etc. Every one of these groups will be self-governing. The principle of self-government will be applied from the largest to the smallest groups. Subject to their possessing the necessary qualifications, the superior grades will be chosen by their fellow workers. Discipline there will be, and must be, but it will be the self-imposed discipline of free men. Each worker will have his share of responsibility and his status in the industry. He will not be turned off without pay when his services are temporarily not required. He will be a worker

enrolled in a particular service and entitled to the standard remuneration of his grade.

The internal management of the service will be in the hands of the workers : the kind of service to be provided and the amount to be charged for it must be a matter for negotiation with other organised bodies ; but in any case the industry must provide a standard of life for the workers based on the productive capacity of the community. The whole industry of the country will be regarded as a unity, and there will be no question of one section taking advantage of its economic position as against other sections.

In a similar way other services, mining, building, textile, engineering, etc., will be organised. The exact system will doubtless differ in each industry. It would be absurd to have precisely the same system for agriculture and transport. Experience will show what is best suited for each particular service, and, provided that the general principle is maintained, the workers in each industry will make their own schemes. The Miners' Federation and the Building Trades have by precept and example shown the way. It is the duty of the workers in every industry to follow their example.

THE IMMEDIATE TASK OF THE TRADE UNIONIST.

Such being the general idea of the future control of industry, we must now consider what changes are necessary in Trade Union structure and methods. While of recent years there has been a welcome tendency to substitute a few large Unions for a multitude of small organisations, the Trade Union World is still far too much divided. In particular, craft Union and industrial Union exist side by side, with consequent friction and loss of power.

The craft Union as an exclusive body has had its day. It depended for its success on a policy of exclusion based on the skill of its members. It enabled a limited number of workers to raise themselves slightly above the general level. To-day the progress of invention and mass production

methods have destroyed its economic basis. The new note must be inclusiveness. Workers in a particular industry, of all grades from the most skilled technician down to the lowest skilled labourer, must be in the same Union. In particular, the management grades must be included. With the control of industry by the workers as the objective, organisation by industry becomes imperative. There must be an end to demarcation squabbles and member poaching.

The best solution is undoubtedly the one big all-embracing Union. Within this Union there will be ample room for subsidiary groupings, vertical by industry and horizontal by craft. There must be the widest autonomy for groups and branches consistent with unity of aim and action. The Headquarters of the Union must command the best brains of the movement and must have a thoroughly well-equipped staff, able to consider the industrial position in all its bearings. To the forging of this instrument, old prejudices and obsolete loyalties to societies must give way.

TRADE UNION METHOD.

While the old methods of Trade Unionism, the strike, mutual insurance, and collective bargaining, must necessarily continue for the every-day work of the Unions, they must be employed with more conscious direction. The industrial strike is in the main a defensive weapon and the *last* line of defence at that. Whenever a strike has been decided upon, it must be backed by the whole force of the movement, the exact objective must be laid down, its extent limited beforehand, and a careful calculation made as to the area of industry affected. The strike begun by one section and extended to others piecemeal invites defeat. Simultaneous determination of agreements would help in this connection. Broadly speaking, the strike can now only be employed on a limited field for bringing into line an individual recalcitrant employer or on a national scale. In the latter case the Government is bound to be called in, and the matter becomes political.

A strike on a large scale must be considered carefully in close consultation with the political movement and must only be undertaken for an object of the highest importance affecting the great mass of the workers.

The method of collective bargaining must be used to enforce wherever possible Labour's claim to control. Industrial councils, conciliation boards, and Trade Boards should be considered not merely as useful pieces of machinery for enforcing the common rule, but as means of obtaining insight into the conditions of industry and of insisting on Labour's rights to and interests in an industry and not merely in individual businesses. Every workers' representative on a Works' Committee must in the same way consider the business in which he is employed merely as part of an industry. Much can be done by the use of the collective contract to substitute the discipline of the group for the discipline imposed by the management.

Two final points must be made. First, the necessity for international co-operation with Trade Unionists abroad. To-day is the day of world markets and world combines, and every Trade Unionist must realise that his interests are built up with those of his brothers all over the world. He cannot make a permanent advance at their expense.

Secondly, the new industrial order makes a call on every individual Trade Unionist. It requires his or her conscious effort. The struggle will be severe, and the mere ticket-holder not only gives no help, but actually hinders the coming of industrial democracy.

Let every Trade Unionist realise what his duty is. His membership is not a small thing. It is the sign of his consecration to a great task, nothing less than the liberation of the human race from the industrial machine which it has created and by which it is being destroyed. The present industrial system must pass away, but only when a new order is ready to take its place. That new industrial order is now in the making and its spirit is that of the old Trade Union watchword: "Each for all and all for each."

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